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ABSTRACT

This publication describes options for designing and equipping middle and high school music education suites and suggests means of gaining community support for including full service music suites in new and renovated facilities. It covers the basic music suite, practice rooms, small ensemble rehearsal rooms, recording/MIDI (musical instrument digital interface) studios, and electronic keyboard laboratories. (Contains 12 references.) (GR)

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# Music Education Suites

Wayne Kemp, National Clearinghouse for Educational Facilities
May 2000

This publication describes options for designing and equipping middle and high school music education suites and suggests means of gaining community support for including full service music suites in new and renovated facilities.

### *The Basic Music Suite*

Middle and secondary school music instruction is typically divided into choral, band, and orchestral disciplines. Because the acoustics for bands and orchestras are similar, these ensembles can share a space if schedules permit. Choirs require their own space because the acoustics of choral music differ significantly from instrumental. Therefore, a minimum of two large rehearsal rooms with accompanying office and storage space is necessary for the basic suite.

### *Practice Rooms*

The most common supplement to the basic music suite is the practice room, which can be found in schools dating back to at least the 1960's. Practice rooms provide spaces for individual rehearsal and instruction and can be used by students during their free periods as well as before and after school.

Teachers can arrange lessons with students during their free periods and before or after school. Some music teachers will release students from ½ hour of class rehearsal per week to receive individual instruction in one of the practice rooms. In these cases, instruction is typically private because the financial arrangement is between teacher and student. The school, however, can establish a "below market" rate because it is providing the space. In schools where such arrangements exist, practice rooms may be found in use from dawn to long after school, with barely an empty hour in between.

Practice rooms should be situated so they can be shared by all the disciplines in the music program. Many schools arrange them along a hall that separates the instrumental and choral rehearsal rooms. While this arrangement makes sharing convenient and provides the necessary sound insulation between the two rehearsal rooms without a great deal of structural enhancements, it is difficult to supervise, creating a prime destination for vandals and others. It is better, therefore, to place offices and storage between the rehearsal rooms and locate practice rooms in a more public space so they can be supervised visually from a rehearsal room or staff office. Any trafficked area, even along a common area near the music suite, is better than a secluded hall. If there is ultimately no other option than a secluded area, put the practice rooms under lock and key. Scheduling continuous activity in practice rooms located away from normal circulation will reduce the possibility of misbehavior as well as relieve personnel of the burden of locking and unlocking rooms.

Prefabricated practice modules are quite soundproof and can be installed in a variety of configurations that can be changed should the need arise. Often the most practical alternative for retrofitting an existing music facility, they can economically provide flexibility, acoustical isolation, and proper ventilation.

While vocalists typically require a piano in their practice room at all times, instrumentalists require a piano only when preparing solos with an accompanist. Therefore, it is not necessary to equip all practice rooms with pianos. More practice rooms can fit into a given space if a few smaller rooms that can not accommodate a piano are included. Because the use of these smaller rooms is forever limited, their numbers should be kept to a minimum. Prefabricated modules are very suitable for these rooms, providing flexibility and allowing for future adjustments.

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Community members will more likely support the addition of practice rooms if they understand that students will have access to private instruction at below-market rates, and—perhaps this is even more attractive—without placing after-school or weekend transportation demands on the family.

***Small Ensemble Rehearsal Rooms***

Participation in the small jazz and popular ensembles formed by the choral and instrumental disciplines is generally very competitive. Considered "honors" groups, these ensembles as well as others that may be convened for a variety of academic and community events need their own rehearsal space, especially when the large rehearsal halls are already in use.

Because these ensembles are often student led without adult supervision, the rehearsal rooms should be easily supervised from the outside. These spaces should be soundproof and as simple as possible to allow for maximum flexibility and use by as many different types of groups as possible. Equip them with pianos and flat floors for maximum utility. Prefabricated modules are also an option for smaller rehearsal spaces. To justify their cost and existence, emphasize how accessible and beneficial the special rehearsal spaces will be to the small ensembles, section rehearsals, and community groups. After all, these small ensembles are usually the first groups dispatched into the community to perform at public ceremonies, nursing homes, club meetings, and the like.

***Recording/MIDI Studio***

In the present age of digital production, it costs considerably less to create and equip a recording studio than it used to. Furthermore, the sale of recordings from the school's music ensembles can build community support and even generate funds for the program. Compact disc recordings are so easily and cheaply produced that many ambitious amateur groups have successfully produced and sold high-quality recordings of their own work.

For best value, wire all rehearsal and performing spaces (especially the auditorium) to the recording studio. The ability to make recordings from several spaces is an amenity that can go far toward eliciting community support because the cost of the studio's installation can eventually be recovered by renting it to community groups. Spaces where music is to be recorded must be totally isolated from all external and internal noise or the cost of installing the studio will be wasted. Access to the recording studio should be granted to a small number of contracted recording engineers who know the equipment.

A MIDI (musical instrument digital interface) studio is a facility in which printed music is generated via a keyboard connected to a computer loaded with the appropriate software and where synthesized sounds can be created from the same computer files that generate the printed music. Its potential is magnified when coupled with a recording studio. Therefore, house both sets of equipment in one room. Access to such a facility is a great asset to music teachers who compose and arrange music as well as provides students interested in becoming professional musicians an opportunity to learn a valuable skill.

Because events and movement on the stage often play a role in the recording process, MIDI/recording engineers need to be able to see the stage of the auditorium. A two-way audio connection is sufficient for rooms other than the auditorium, such as rehearsal spaces.

Equipping a MIDI/recording studio presently costs approximately $9,000 per eight tracks of recording and mixing equipment, exclusive of cabling and microphones. A 24-track system (three eight-track modules) is considered the most desirable for professional-quality production of large, mixed ensembles (e.g., chorus with orchestra). To obtain actual costs, bid out an equipment list developed with a recording studio consultant.

***Electronic Keyboard Laboratory***

Electronic keyboard laboratories are popular with students as well as fun, highly effective at discerning talent, and an efficient venue for teaching those who possess modest musical gifts. Even if an extra fee is charged to use a keyboard laboratory, students can learn to play the piano respectably at a cost far below that of private instruction. A keyboard laboratory should be located so that it can be shared by students in all the disciplines of the music program, those who are not involved in the music program, members of the community using the laboratory after hours.

***Pianos***

While not every practice room or rehearsal space needs a piano, it is certain that no piano acquired will

go unused. Plan for as many high-quality pianos as can be afforded and then outfit the entire music suite with wide doors and flat floors to facilitate their relocation as necessary. (The tympani players will also be thankful for the wide doors.) Remember, more expensive pianos are better made and will return the extra cost in longevity and lower maintenance. Piano suppliers are often willing to donate instruments in exchange for advertising. Acknowledge their generosity with conspicuous signage on the instruments—it will be read by hundreds of community musicians who use the facilities, which adds up to years of easy, well-targeted advertising that only costs the vendors what they gave up in profit on the sales.

***Gaining Community Support***

Opposition to spending on school improvements is common but often pales when compared to that exerted against spending money to get a first-rate facility for the performing arts. If the music program's ensembles have performed widely in the community, emphasize the contribution the ensembles have made to the cultural life of the community when funding issues arise.

Even in the most favorable climate, however, those who seek a full-service music suite should include a plan for community use of the desired facilities that demonstrates needs filled for good value. For instance, rural areas typically have community ensembles that would benefit from more sophisticated facilities, while metropolitan areas may have the facilities in the community, but at a price or location that is prohibitive for some ensembles. Large rehearsal rooms can be transformed into performing venues of a less formal nature (i.e., coffeehouse or open mike night). Gain local groups' commitment to use the facilities and then ask them to help raise the money to build them.

The full-service music suite ideally will be situated near spaces destined for after-hours use and have easy access to the auditorium. Parking, lighting, and access should be planned around the certainty of having more than one space in use at any time. Any facility that does not offer patrons convenience and safety will quickly earn a reputation as one to be avoided.

A complete music suite can be as cost effective as a complete athletic training facility, which less frequently offers access to the public and yet seldom encounters opposition the likes of a music training facility. Build a better music facility, fill it day and night, and the results will be heard throughout the community.

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